How did gay marriage become a sign of mental health?: Interpreting romance, gay desire, and psychosocial adjustment in the 1950s

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Wednesday, July 24, 2013
7:30 – 9 pm in Seelye 101
All are Welcome
Smith College School for Social Work

Although gay marriage is usually understood as a recent innovation, gay men in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s (primarily, but by no means exclusively, white and middle-class) frequently used the term “marriage” to describe long-term same-sex relationships. Their use of the term marriage, and their understanding of these relationships, were shaped by psychoanalytic and psychosocial discourses, which gained unprecedented influence following World War II. The key term was “adjustment.” This concept had roots both in the mental hygiene movement and psychoanalysis, but came to be deployed in variable, and often ambiguous ways to advance existing ideals of marriage, gender, and sexuality by clinicians, researchers, and activists. Present-day conceptions of attachment continue to draw on similar rhetoric and ideals in conceiving gay marriage as a sign of maturity and health. This presentation on the history of gay marriage and the discourse of adjustment aims to provoke discussion among clinical social workers about current conceptions of relational health.

Stephen Vider recently completed his Ph.D. in the History of American Civilization at Harvard University, with a secondary field in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. This August, he will start at Yale University as the Clay Postdoctoral Fellow in the History of Sexuality. He is also co-teaching a continuing education course this July, “Masculinity Studies: Histories, Theories, and Clinical Applications,” at Smith College School for Social Work, with his partner David S. Byers, a lecturer in the MSW program.